

On View

In so thoroughly media-ridden a town as Los Angeles, those who would make their own images, and/or make images their own way, walk a fine line between falling out and selling out. By teaming their diverse skills and talents, Jeff Charbonneau and Eliza French have been able to determine both a coherent style and a stable modus operandi that draws upon technical skills honed in Tinseltown without being compromised by those very skills. And while the eclecticism of their backgrounds determines the rich heterogeneity of their images, their visual language and spirit find root in a shared responsiveness to sources in 19th-century art and culture. As a result, Charbonneau & French, who have collaborated since 2003, have compiled an impressive body of work brimming with mystery and sensuality, self-consciously but elegantly Gothic—stills, it would seem, from an Edgar Allan Poe film adaptation directed by Ingmar Bergman, or Fellini's take on Lewis Carroll.

"Our images," writes Eliza French, "refer in some way to a revisionist history of our own pasts." And, she might have added, presents. French, schooled in art history, also curates



The Fury, 2005

PETER FRANK

exhibitions, under the moniker "elk." ("Eliza French" itself is a pseudonym.) Jeff Charbonneau—a direct descendant of Sacajawea (via her son, the youngest member of the Lewis & Clark expedition)—studied music and anthropology and now works as a film editor and soundtrack composer. Their toned silver gelatin prints conjure what French describes as a "traveling theater of the photograph." The one narrative constant is a lone female figure (French herself in most cases), enacting scenes of madness and playfulness, opulence and deprivation. Although many of the images provide an erotic



The Sepulture, 2005

frisson, the effects are less soft-core than soft-edge, applying a present-day visual interpretation of the "romantic" to the true romanticism—erratic, obsessed, tempestuous—of the 19th century. (In fact, as French claims, their work manifests "the encroaching stench of new Victorianism," implicitly criticizing the current atmosphere of moral reproach in America that suppresses and supplants the vitality of the 1960s and '70s.) Such artful historicism builds not only on the anachronisms permitted by post-modernist discourse but on pop culture's own plundering of the past. Julia Margaret Cameron's studio portraits, Man Ray's eccentric still lifes, the moment captured in Jacques-Henri Lartigue's seemingly perpetual gloom, all recur in Charbonneau & French's oeuvre, less as a way of paying these photographers homage than of exploring the breadth of their proto-surrealism. Enhanced by Charbonneau's darkroom manipulations—dodging, burning, diffusion, multiple filtering, gold and selenium toning—the imagery (often shot in the dark with light-painting techniques) becomes enveloped in an almost tactile patina, but does not turn painterly. The only digital application occurs when the images are sized upward.

In the context of their vision, Charbonneau's extensive labors in the darkroom can be seen almost as a performative reassertion of his and French's Gothic revivalism. Similarly, French "performs" her wraithlike on-camera persona, honing the affectations of the Goth youth subculture into a fully realized aesthetic gambit. In this respect, Charbonneau & French's work adds to the neo-dandy trajectory explored by such flamboyant self-documenting pairs as Pierre et Gilles, McDermott & McGough, and Gilbert and George. Now, however, dandyism has been given a noir edge. □

Peter Frank is art critic for LA Weekly and Angeleno Magazine and curator at the Riverside Art Museum.